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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000539

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PM](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL CALL ON PRESIDENT TORRIJOS

Classified By: A/DCM THOMAS E. MESA, REASON 1.4 (A) AND (B)

Summary

¶1. (C) During President Torrijos' June 30 farewell lunch in honor of the Ambassador, Torrijos underscored the excellent state of bilateral relations, thanked the Ambassador for his work in sustaining that relationship, said he would move forward with re-structuring the security forces despite the false specter of "militarization" raised by the opposition, and spoke of the importance of institutionalizing and insulating the security forces from politics. Torrijos lambasted the media for what he described as a premeditated campaign to discredit him and his administration in an attempt to weaken the ruling Democratic Revolutionary Party's (PRD) chances for victory in next year's presidential elections. Torrijos expressed his hope that the Embassy would maintain its impartiality in the presidential campaign after the Ambassador's departure. The Ambassador and A/DCM assured him that our policy remained unchanged: we support democracy, the strengthening of democratic institutions, and not any particular party or candidate. End summary.

Bilateral Relations Never Better

¶2. (U) President Torrijos hosted a private lunch June 30 to bid farewell to Ambassador Eaton. He was joined by First Vice-President and Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis and Second Vice-President Ruben Arosemena. Torrijos underscored that the state of bilateral relations had never been better. It is a relationship, he added, based on mutual respect. He thanked the Ambassador for his valuable contributions to this positive relationship, noting that both he and the Ambassador came to their respective offices more or less at the same time. The Ambassador thanked Torrijos for his kind words and concurred that bilateral relations were strong.

Moving Forward with Security Force
Re-structuring

¶3. (C) Torrijos said he was adamant in moving forward with the re-structuring of the Panamanian security forces. In the next two months, he plans to proceed with the merger of the National Maritime Service (SMN) and the National Air Service to create a National Aero-Naval Service (SENAN), create a National Frontier Force (SENAFRONT), name a uniformed officer as head of the National Police, and reform the Council for Public Safety and National Defense (CSPDN). He and Lewis dismissed media and opposition criticism of the PRD's design to "re-militarize" the security forces as bogus. They noted that the PRD ruled by a new generation had no intention of reverting to military rule. On the contrary, Torrijos sees the re-structuring as a step away from the past since the new laws would supersede existing laws from the Noriega years. More importantly for Torrijos, the new structure would serve to create a professional service of well-trained officers who

would respond to the growing security concerns of citizens and help secure Panama's open borders, especially its long coast lines, from narcotraffickers and terrorists. What he wants, Torrijos underlined, is to institutionalize the security forces, keeping them away from undue political interference. He emphasized that he was the first president not to use the security forces to spy on political opponents. He lamented the "mess" he inherited when he assumed office. The security forces, including the Institutional Protective Service (SPI), the Panamanian equivalent of the Secret Service, had been infested with "political hacks."

Partisan Media?

¶4. (C) Torrijos claimed that the media had launched a deliberate campaign to discredit him and the PRD. He was particularly peeved at articles in the June 30 edition of "La Prensa" (the paper of record) that alleged that his "luxurious" personal property and real estate were evidence of corruption and personal enrichment while President of Panama. Lewis added that the media had ignored information from the President's press office denying the specific allegations made in the article. Torrijos said "unethical" media moguls, employees of opposition figures, were blatantly trying to forge a united opposition for the upcoming presidential elections. He also feared that some in the opposition (read: Martinelli) were dangerously cavorting with the leftists construction union, SUNTRACS, and others for short-term political gains and economic interests without measuring the long-term danger to democracy. The opposition's anti-Torrijos campaign was critical if the opposition had any chance of winning, Torrijos said, because of the high approval rating he enjoys (70-80 percent) within the PRD ranks. He lamented, however, that unlike the past, the majority of PRD faithful were involved in the political campaigns out of personal interests rather than any political conviction.

Don't Be Fooled by the Opposition

¶5. (C) Torrijos expressed his concern that after the Ambassador departed the Embassy would be dragged into the Panamanian presidential campaign. The Ambassador and the A/DCM assured him that while the U.S. will continue to follow the election process closely, the Embassy would maintain its neutrality in Panama's domestic politics. The U.S. will not support any particular candidate or party. Our policy, we stressed, was to support democracy and strengthen democratic institutions.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) Torrijos clearly felt comfortable during the lunch, comfortable enough to bear his frustrations and fears. He showed, once again, his thin skin, defending with passion his integrity and his pure motives in governing Panama. We should take advantage of the confidentiality he shares with us as we navigate a complex political landscape, looking to advance our cooperation on security issues. In the end, the public wants security and the public forces want professional management. Getting Panama's security apparatus up and running will not be an easy task, but one that is of great interest to the U.S. The manner in which the GOP will implement the re-structuring of its security elements, through Presidential decree and not through debate and a vote in the National Assembly, will not make the task any easier. Torrijos is also clearly concerned about the role the Embassy could play in influencing the upcoming election and wants to ensure we remain interested observers, not participants. Believing he is misunderstood and maligned by the press, we can expect him to lash out more frequently and publicly about slights, real or imagined as his time in office expires.

